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Some Preliminary Comments on Rorschach Responses Among  
Three Australian Aboriginal Groups

Though the cross-cultural use of Rorschachs has been under attack by many cultural relativists who believe that an instrument designed by one culture is inadequate as a measure of personality in another, the most experienced and insightful of Rorschach users such as Bruno Klopfer, George DeVos and others have found it to be one of the most powerful projective tools available. Since science moves from the emic to the etic, the particular to the general, the idiosyncratic to the lawful, we find absolute arguments against the use of cross-cultural Rorschach testing to be solipsistic and rather naive epistemologically. With appropriate sensitivity to cultural differences Rorschachs provide a nearly matchless "back up" tool to any culture and personality specialist.

Nonetheless, certain problems remain. This communication is an attempt both to describe the uses and some of the difficulties in Rorschach use cross-culturally. The senior author administered the test and then attempted a qualitative analysis of the results utilizing the protocols to explain certain psycho-cultural elements, and by using the insights of Dr. Cawte, garnered in ten years of contact with the Aborigines, the cultures of the Aboriginal groups could be and were used to explain certain of the protocol components.

This paper is then an analysis of the significance of Rorschach similarities and differences between Australian Aboriginal groups.

1 Klopfer analyzed Apache Rorschachs "blind" and successfully divided the protocols into Mescalero and Mimbreno Apache simply on internal evidence. (personal communication Bryce Boyer, M.D.)

Rorschachs were collected from individual Yolngu at Galiwinku on Elcho Island in the Northern Territory; Pitjantjatjara of the central desert at Ernabella, South Australia; and at Bourke in New South Wales from individuals of mixed Caucasian and Aboriginal ancestry.

These projective tests were collected as part of a research effort whose focus, apart from the individual research interests of the authors, was to assist in health planning for Australian Aborigines.<sup>2</sup>

The Yolngu inhabit the tropical islands and coastal eucalypt forests of North East Arnhem Land, Australia, and for the most part have experienced significant contact with white Australia only since World War II, and have abandoned warfare and internecine feuding only since the late 1950's. They are, however, familiar with such matters as trade and cultural difference through long term contact with Indonesian and more recently with Japanese sailing crews.

The Pitjantjatjara of the central desert region of Australia are short in stature (males - 5'6" as opposed to approximately 6' for Yolngu) with straighter and usually fairer hair. They are less sophisticated in cross-cultural contact and more timid toward Europeans. Fairly significant contact with white Australia dates from the 1930's, though most Pitjantjatjara still live in small group shelters called wiltjas even on the outskirts of Ernabella. Most young people have some command, even if poor, of English, but prefer their own language in communication with other Pitjantjatjara.

The Aborigines around Bourke, a river town in the far west of New

2 The program, entitled Australian Transcultural Psychiatry, was designed by Professor John Cawte of the University of New South Wales, and funded by a grant from The National Health and Medical Research Council, Canberra. The author was invited to Australia for six months as a Senior Research Fellow under this program.

South Wales, have been in significant contact with whites for three generations, the early phase of which was violent and resulted in their decimation. Following this, the remnant was absorbed among white frontier society and the mixed-bloods resulting from these unions has persisted as a distinct social subgroup to the present time. About half live in shanties by the river and about half live in the town in regular houses. Though all are of mixed blood, they resemble the Pitjantjatjara more than the Yolngu. All speak English, only a few speak any of the several languages characteristic of the now nearly defunct groups from which they came.

The three groups are physically separate from each other by over a thousand miles and have no discernible present or historical contact, speak different languages, and are physically distinct in phenotypic appearance, which probably reflects some real genetic isolation from each other.

Interestingly, at least on gross dimensions they are however strikingly similar in their Rorschach responses. Further, there are other behavioral similarities between the groups, and especially similarities in child socialization and relationships between the sexes which might be adduced from long time similarity of Australian Aboriginal groups. Since the present condition of the three groups vis-a-vis the Australian Federal and various State governments differ dramatically, and since the history of their contact with non-Aborigines is greatly different, these similarities cannot easily be attributed solely to their social structural position vis-a-vis white Australia, as we shall note below.

#### General Comments

Male Rorschachs whether from Bourke, ERnabella or Galiwinku contained more responses, based upon a wider variety of determinants and more grandiloquent themes than female responses. Males responses were remarkably

characterized by massive magical thinking, poor determinants, confabulations, perseverations, rigidity and an inability to locate percepts, poor percepts and some preoccupation with sexual themes.

Women's responses tended to be even more rigid than those of men, to be concrete, form dominated and full of anxious themes such as clouds. Most women rejected cards IV and VII which are often seen as sexual in nature. <sup>3</sup> Many of those who did respond saw blatantly sexual themes. Substantial white space usage (passive aggressivity), extremely long response times, childish percepts, but fairly good and accurate percepts also <sup>4</sup> tended to characterize females.

The Yolngu on superficial examination produced the "best" protocols. At least they were the most imaginative and colorful. The Bourke people produced the least arresting material on average in its colorfulness with one or two exceptions, but organization was better. The Pitjantjatjara were intermediate.

#### The trans-Australian Psycho-Cultural Framework

We suggest that these great similarities reflect the overwhelming similarity across Australia in Aboriginal social cultural life and aboriginal characteristic psychodynamics. Moreover, we suggest that present day Aborigines are still much more like each other on the unconscious level than they are like any European group in Australia.

- 3 Women anthropologists report that sex talk among women is frequent and expressive (Janice Reid, personal communication), but agree that it is extremely inhibited with men and in test situations. We consider this as further evidence of the constriction of social sex role among Aborigines. It is probably normal for women cross-culturally to be more reticent about sexual matters in the presence of strangers, though there may be exceptions. Nonetheless, the constriction in these responses is consistent with the general constriction of responses and of the very life of women here.
- 4 It is our impression that female responses were more "accurate" than those of males. Perhaps females have a greater need to deal with reality.

There are a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon. First there is the possibility that racial similarity, based on some genetic substrate is responsible for similarities in Rorschach protocols. If this were so then the Bourke group, many of whom were over 3/4 Caucasian in genetic background (inferred by asking about family backgrounds and by observing phenotypes) would be substantially different. They were not. Additionally, genetic material infused from Indonesian sailors certainly must have produced a gene pool for the Yolngu different from that of the central desert tribes.

Such genetic differences do not appear to have created, upon our initial analysis, systematically grossly different protocols. Finally it would be very difficult to explain the dramatic differences between the sexes on this basis.

If we turn for explanation to social structural factors we might attribute these expressions of pathology to the "oppressed condition" of Aborigines vis-a-vis white Australia, or to "cultural imperialism" or some other conceptual variant. However the Yolngu have never been oppressed by any outsider. Only in this generation have they come fully under Australian law. In fact, their situation is one of near political and economic autonomy, a privileged protectorate of the Australian government.

The Pitjantjatjara have less autonomy since they settled in missions in the 1930's and 40's. However, earlier psychoanalytic work on a culturally related group by Roheim suggests no remarkable difference between them at that point and now, at least insofar as our concerns are indicated. <sup>5</sup>

The people around Bourke are actually the survivors of one generation of bloody fighting with whites followed by intermarriage, acculturation and

5 We find that we differ with Roheim's earlier work in his explanation of some behaviors, a subject too involved for this paper.

assimilation. That they resemble the other two groups in any systematic fashion suggests another level of explanation is needed.

It might be argued that the responses which we suggest reflect high levels of pathology are being discussed in a Western psychiatric framework and have no validity for non Westerners. Since this is a long standing dispute in trans-cultural psychiatry and in anthropology, it will not be settled at this time. We suggest however, that the information which has been made available to use in theoretical developments in psychoanalytic theory over the past 20 years or so have made it a world theory. To insist that only a member of 'X' group can understand another 'X' is to reduce science to solipsism. As those sophisticated in psychoanalysis also know - it is additionally a common, if somewhat archaic defense against insight.

We suggest as a level of explanation that the trans-cultural culture of pre-contact Australian Aborigines was ubiquitously similar in certain crucial aspects. We suggest also that these crucial trans-cultural similarities were underlain by shared psychodynamic issues.

The trans Australian cultural realities which we speak of are:

- (1) The importance of men and the relegation of women.
- (2) An occupational every day division between sexes, with man the hunter and warrior (spiritual) and woman the gatherer and follower (secular).
- (3) Polygyny and/or its socialization equivalent of exclusive child socialization by women. Men did not care for children.
- (4) Ubiquitous phallic form ceremonial objects.
- (5) Ubiquitous extrusion from the group and penile surgery for pubescent (late latency) males to create adult men.
- (6) Gerontocracy.

- (7) The all-pervasiveness of sexual interests and concerns.
- (8) The use of women as property.
- (9) Belief in a "dreamtime" from which all life came and to which it will return.
- (10) Sacred waterholes which are the natal spots of ancestral spirits.

Men are the keepers of the sacred objects. They have the only overt social power and importance. Most ceremonial and social organization power, as well as wealth, are controlled by men.

Women are property, but the only really important property. Nearly all conflicts, fights and anxious discussions by men concern women. Kept in under jealous watch, and forced into marriages very often at young age with much older men, they tend to create and sustain sexual jealousy among their mates. Women tend to tease and seduce men, who in turn try to have intercourse with them. Married men are generally certain that their wives would be unfaithful if provided an opportunity.

Women are forced into realistic assumptions about the limits of their power. They must know how far to tease a husband (which they do to anger him and revenge themselves for their drudgery) and yet avoid a beating or worse. Women are not infrequently beaten and shut up if their talk is not wanted. Men do not extensively socialize with women except for sex and talk with them to a comparatively limited degree.

We are preparing for publication at a later date, a more extensive statement of the culture and personality of these groups, but in brief, the psychodynamics which we find significant for these groups are roughly  
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the following.

- 6 In offering these comments we are aware that some scholars feel a need to idealize modes of childrearing in primitive or non-Western societies, and may find our phrasing disparaging or pejorative. In fact, to idealize or to normalize modes of childrearing performs a disservice to those concerned and serves only to infantilize them. Our intent in offering these comments is of course not to disparage but to provide a base from which remedial developments may be planned by the people concerned.

Child socialization is inconsistent ranging from intense and close involvement to near abandonment depending upon the other preoccupations of the mother.

The child is permitted a wide variety of anti-social behavior and tantrums are unrestrained. Parents deny ability to conduct, and responsibility for imparting moral education in everyday family settings and occurrences; such interactions are not seen as opportunities for the child's moral development. At the same time young infants are subjected by mothers to premature self-nurturing and to sibling attack. Parents deny ability to restrain sibling attacks on infants.

At the same time the child is learning that boys are treated better than girls but that girls can cajole boys through promises of sexual favors. Except for the Bourke group, fathers are not significant in child care except occasionally to restrain maternal abuse. Circumcision and subincision are described by the Aborigines themselves as necessary to separate the male child from the mother. This is done in part to associate the boys with the spirit ancestors such as the kangaroo, which has a bipid penis, and in part to create a vagina in the penis (for the Pitjant-jatjara) so that boys can be reborn of invaginated men. We might expect with this some substantial cross sex identification and certainly the masculine control of women would be one important defense against homosexual anxiety.

Since the latency period was traditionally one of limited obligations, and since the earlier childhood was characterized by inconsistent maternal care, the problem of poorly internalized controls should be, and is, evident.



The entire extended and complex social system based upon an elaborate kinship system, seems to operate to control access to women and to restrain violence (Aborigines are quick to note that in the absence of external controls, they do not expect socially positive behavior.)

The above is descriptively most accurately a representation of the Yolngu who still have polygamy and arranged marriages and total control by males over females. The Pitjantjatjara have retained comparatively little plural marriage presently, but still manage to exclude females from the sacred aspects of ceremonial life, consider females as less than males, and tend to unisex groupings.

In Bourke, polygamy has been replaced by serial monogamy (rarely with benefit of legal marriage). Women still occupy subordinate positions, and though "love matches" have replaced arranged marriages in large part, anxiety about proper relationships still exists.

Overall what has been created is an adult who is dominated by magical thinking and is highly impulsive, restrained by external constraints rather than internal controls, fearful of ghosts and spirits and having a hyper concern with sexuality and controls. Behavior is controlled through demands made by kin based corporate groups and alliance relationships, or merely uncontrolled where these are not present.

One could suggest that the tendency to conform outward formal behaviors to the European model has left relatively untouched both the underlying values and attitudes and the socialization practices leading to them.

#### Rorschach Reflection of Psycho-Cultural Reality

We believe that one can see reflected in the Rorschach responses on the gross level the general social cultural expectations themselves based upon the formal and dimensions of socialization.

We are painting this with a very broad brush, and more sophisticated analyses are needed. However, we find males, insecure about sexual identity and needing massive external controls, defending themselves against anxiety by grandiosity socially. This is clearly revealed in their responses to the Rorschach. On the Rorschach, however, the hollowness of their grandiosity shows through in the poverty of determinants and locations and form.

In the social world the anxiety shows through in the continual overt, ubiquitous fear that neither one's woman (women) or fellow men are sufficiently under control. Before white law, murder was common. So common that individuals feared for their lives in any social gathering. Young men were killed ostensibly for taboo transgression, but in reality as the old men admit, to reduce the numbers competing for women.

Women, repressed in reality, constrained and in a sense haremized, retain fearfulness of their behavior in many contexts. Yet they are aware of the weapon of their sexuality and stubbornness (their passive aggressivity). to defeat men with. Wives may serve poorly prepared food to a man with whom they are discontented, comment negatively about him, flirt with other men, and denigrate his sexuality. They are aware that the central issue of their lives is the control of their sexuality.

On the Rorschach they reflect this concern with form dominated responses, rejections and many overt sexual responses. We have already noted the passive aggressive aspects of their responses.

This short communication is by no means meant to be a thorough statement of the Rorschachs for these groups or of their motivating dynamics; it is however, an initial attempt to note the striking correspondence between these

projective test results, cultural realities, and apparent underlying psychodynamics.